

American Experiments: The Production of New Forms in U.S. Independent Film and Video

Introduction. Independent Media and Its Institutions.

Against the dominant view, argues that an aesthetic analysis of individual texts must be combined with a sociological analysis of the institutions and structures of the independent sector, and both of those must be seen in a process of historical change and development. Against the dominant view, argues that independent film and video can be productively considered together rather than as totally separate mediums. Against the dominant view, argues that innovative documentary works should be considered with the artistic avant garde. Against the dominant view, argues that new forms most often emerge from the need to express new content and are related to new social and political movements, rather than emerging from the need to solve formal problems of the medium.

main ideas sketched out in draft, needs to be systematically organized and written

Another History of the Avant Garde.

A deliberately provocative re-reading of the history of U.S. experimental film in light of the introduction.

first draft completed

with B. Ruby Rich, "Le Cinéma d'avant-garde et ses rapports avec le cinéma militant," tr. Katerina Thomadeki. *Cinémaction*, no. 10-11, spring-summer 1980, pp. 55-68.

The Critical Construction of Independent Film/Video

A. Case study: Portrait of Jason. Considers a film which has never fit well into traditional categories: an autobiographical performance, a documentary of an individual done through one long interview, and obviously "structural" in its conception and execution, the work has been excluded from the avant garde and from documentary histories. The maker, Shirley Clarke, has been neglected by feminist critics, and when recognized by them, this film--about a black gay man--has been little discussed. The film has also run into problems with gay film festivals because the protagonist is not "politically correct" in various attitudes.

extended notes

B. The Critical Institutions of the Avant Garde. Discusses critics, editors, teachers, curators, distributors, and exhibitors as shaping what is recognized and what is left out of avant garde.

basic research completed.

C. Mainstreams and Margins. Through an extended consideration of work by Marlon Riggs, discusses dominant forms and alternatives to them.

"Mainstreams and Margins: *Ethnic Notions* and *Tongues Untied*," *Jump Cut* no. 36 (June 1991), pp. 108-118, 31.

Nonprofessionals. Case studies of three figures who challenge the boundaries of the canonical avant garde history.

A. Theodore Huff.

"Theodore Huff: Filmmaker and Historian," *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avantgarde 1919-1945*, Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1995). [forthcoming]

B. Walter Gutmann. Study of a "gentleman amateur" who falls outside the established canon.
complete draft.

C. Alice Worthen.

"My Aunt Alice's Home Movies," *Journal of Film and Video*, 38:3-4 (summer-fall, 1986) pp. 25-35.

Experimental Documentaries. Extended argument for the history of independent experimental work to include documentaries.

Partially completed, some additonal writing.

"Ethnography/Ethics/Aethetics: Studies in Cross-Cultural Film/Video," Society for Cinema Studies, Los Angeles, May 1991.

*"On the Border of Ethics and Ethnography: Louis Hock's THE MEXICAN TAPES," paper for the Conference on Documentary, Film in the Cities, Nov. 1984.

"Documentary Filmmaking on the Margins: Bill Stamets' Super 8mm Ethnography," *Cinematograph*, 4 (1991), 161-168.

Rethinking Countercinema. **Cry of Jazz**, countercinema theory, and the film theory film. A consideration of the video essay form and its emergence in the 80s and 90s as a new major subgenre.

partially completed. some additional writing

"Women's Diary Videos," Console-ing Passions Conference, Seattle, April 1995.

"Expository Strategies in Experimental Video Essays by Women," Console-ing Passions Conference, U of Arizona, April 1994

American Experiments argues for a revisionist analysis of the U.S. avant garde media and draws on published articles reviews, and conference papers done over the past 15 years. It stands with the work of some other recent writers on the subject such as Jan-Christopher Horak, Lauren Rabinovitz, and David James in re-orienting the field from a dominant discourse which assumes that experimental work is defined by the evolving solution of internal formal problems. Against this idea, which was perhaps useful in gaining initial recognition for film and video as legitimate arts by taking over the terms of the leading art historical and art critical ways of discussing art, I argue for a more disorderly approach.

For example, the chapter, "Another Original History," presents a dissenting reading of the avant garde based on the assumption that much of the time new forms are created to express new and radical contents rather than simply to solve formal problems. Such a revision shifts the field to emphasize work with strong social and political implications. It also includes a large amount of work which has been previously excluded from the lyrical and oratorical documentaries of the 1930's to the in-the-streets style of the Newsreel group in the late 60's to the in-your-face style of punk innovation in the 70's. It also calls for a revision of some established ways of ordering the field. For example, Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley's work of the 1960's includes comic-satiric depictions of motherhood, yet these works have been ignored by a generation of feminist critics who were disinterested in or postponing motherhood and who disliked the casual excess of the Nelson-Wiley West Coast style. Similarly, Carolee Schneeman's heterosexually explicit film **Fuses** has been excluded from the current feminist canon. My concern is not only with validated this neglected work, but also with explaining why the exclusion took place.

Other chapters include significant analyses of figures who have been neglected by the dominant discourse. This includes: Theodore Huff, active in the 30's and 40's; Walter Gutman, a "gentleman amateur" from the 60s-80's; my aunt's home movies; Barbara Hammer, the lesbian-feminist experimentalist; Bill Stamets, the personal documentarist. The goal of **American Experiments** is not to create a new canon, but to provide tools for thinking beyond the restrictive order of canon formations.

"Women's Diary Videos," Console-ing Passions Conference, Seattle, April 1995.

"Expository Strategies in Experimental Video Essays by Women," Console-ing Passions Conference, U of Arizona, April 1994

*"Fluxus and Film" Gallery Lecture for "In and Around Fluxus" film screenings, part of the "Fluxus: A Conceptual Country" exhibition, Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Oct. 1993.

"Ethnography/Ethics/Aesthetics: Studies in Cross-Cultural Film/Video," Society for Cinema Studies, Los Angeles, May 1991.

*"On the Border of Ethics and Ethnography: Louis Hock's THE MEXICAN TAPES," paper for the Conference on Documentary, Film in the Cities, Nov. 1984.

"Theodore Huff: Filmmaker and Historian," *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avantgarde 1919-1945*, Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1995). [forthcoming]

"Forms, Politics, Makers, and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary," in Thomas Waugh, ed., *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of Radical Documentary Film* (Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 318-342.

"MARILYN TIMES FIVE," in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, eds., *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (NY: Dutton, 1977). Reprint in revised excerpt form of "Seeing Through Cinema Verite...", 1974.

"Touch This: Barbara Hammer's Risky Visions," catalogue essay for a retrospective show, "The Films of Barbara Hammer," Mary Reimer Ross Film Theatre, University of Nebraska, March 1992. [commissioned essay; designed brochure, includes photo essay from framegrabbed stills]

"Documentary Filmmaking on the Margins: Bill Stamets' Super 8mm Ethnography," *Cinematograph*, 4 (1991), 161-168.

"My Aunt Alice's Home Movies," *Journal of Film and Video*, 38:3-4 (summer-fall, 1986) pp. 25-35.

with B. Ruby Rich, "Le Cinéma d'avant-garde et ses rapports avec le cinéma militant," tr. Katerina Thomadeki. *Cinémaction*, no. 10-11, spring-summer 1980, pp. 55-68.

"Mainstreams and Margins: *Ethnic Notions and Tongues Untied*," *Jump Cut* no. 36 (June 1991), pp. 108-118, 31.

"Reading and Thinking about the Avant-garde," *Jump Cut* no. 6 (Mar.-Apr. 1975), pp. 21-25.

Review of Bauhaus film show *New Art Examiner*, Mar. 89

"Film and Video: Something to Say," *Dialogue: An Art Journal*, 11: 4 (July/Aug 88), 11.

"Film and Video: Looking Askance," *Dialogue: An Art Journal*, 11:3 (May-June 88),

"Film and Video: Critical Corrections," *Dialogue: An Art Journal*, 11:2 (Mar-Apr 88),

"Margin notes" (review of new work by Nathan Dorsky), *Afterimage* 15:7 (Feb 88), 21.

"Film and Video: Video Ascendancy," *Dialogue: An Art Journal*, 11:1 (Jan-Feb 88),

"Film and Video: The Dan Curry Syndrome," *Dialogue: An Art Journal*, 10:6 (Nov.-Dec. 87), 12.

Review of Chicago group video show, *New Art Examiner*, May 87.

Review of Jim Benning, *LANDSCAPE SUICIDES*, *New Art Examiner*, April 87.

Review of film show by Bill Stamets, *New Art Examiner*, Jan 87

"LIVES OF PERFORMERS," *Women and Film*, 1:5-6 (summer 1974). pp. 52-54.

with John Hess, "Doing Serious Business," interview with Freude Bartlett on independent film distribution, *Jump Cut* no. 31 (spring 1986), pp. 30-34.